

Survival of the Fittest

“So, thought you could get away with it, eh?”

James drew himself up, holding his handgun firmly. All his weight was on his left leg, his right one bleeding profusely from a bullet wound, as he turned to the two men who had been chasing him. His left shoulder hung dislocated at his side from his earlier jump off the bridge. Despite all this, he smiled.

“Why are you smiling, punk?” yelled one of the guys. “You thought you could just steal from us and get away with it?”

“Yeah,” breathed James, chuckling in the dark alley. “And I will get away with it because I’m not some Sap.”

“We’re not Saps!” yelled the second one, tightening his hold on his gun.

Both of them fired once and then stared at the little black bullets they had just shot, which were hanging harmlessly in midair. After a moment, they emptied their clips. The same thing happened to the other seven bullets – they had used nine to subdue him. Before they could do so much as lower their hands, the ammunition swivelled around and buried themselves into the men. They were dead before they hit the ground.

James began to straighten up, flinching with pain. “About goddamn time, Magnum!” he said, wheezing.

“You’re welcome,” said the black-haired woman as she stepped out of the shadows. “Do you have the goods?”

James smiled. “Yeah, Mulrone caught me while I was grabbin’ the stuff. Chased me all the way down Gate street, but I got ‘em.”

“Good, now let’s get back to base before Boss comes looking,” she muttered, looking at the bodies of the dead men. “Or someone else comes looking.”

“Wanna take this damn bullet out of my leg first? It hurts like a mother fucker.”

The dark-skinned woman raised her eyebrow, then lifted her hand beside her face, and the bullet came whizzing out of his leg. Magnum closed her palm over it as it landed, and chuckled at James’ sudden exclamation of pain. She opened her hand again and looked at the bullet.

“Suck it up, princess,” she jeered. “It’s only a nine mil.”

“Well, those little fuckers hurt like a bitch.”

James gasped, this time with relief, as the bullet wound closed over with a new layer of skin. Then he hit his arm up against the wall, and there was a squelching noise accompanied by a small pop as it relocated itself in its socket. He sighed with relief as he walked over to where his companion was standing.

“Just another day in paradise,” he said, gazing around the dark alleyway, massaging his translucent skin and cracking his knuckles.

“No kidding. Let’s get out of here before Mulrone sends more men. He really didn’t want us to get whatever the Boss sent us for.”

Cars drove by, and one honked its horn aimlessly at slow-moving traffic. The only source of light came from the streetlamp installed along the side of the road. A light fog was beginning to form over the hot pavement as the air cooled drastically. It smelled like civilization.

They walked by the glassy skyscrapers, glowing blue in their fluorescence. The streets were littered with trash, wet from the torrential rain that had fallen only hours ago. Artificial bulbs lit each stretch of sidewalk, most of them smeared with dirt and other filth. The sky was lit with pollution, and not a star could be seen.

As they continued down the streets, advertisements popped out at James. Victoria Secret, with a thin woman, her hair perfectly curled and flowing in a fake breeze, her overlarge breasts protruding from a

sexy black bra. Captain Morgan, with two half-naked men in a sword fight. McDonalds, with a young blond waitress eating a hamburger suggestively.

There were few people wandering the street at that time of night, and those who did was around were, like James and Magnum, “freaks.” They were superhuman, no longer part of the species. They had outgrown their race. But they still lived in a human world, and therefore had human names. James’ Freak name was Newskin, and Magnum’s Institution name was Sarah. Only Boss was allowed to call them by their Institution names.

A human – he was clearly human, indicated by his white cigarette and his choice of cotton-based clothing – walked by them, flipping up the lapels of his coat to avoid making eye contact. James fingered the gun in his pocket, disgusted by the man’s presence, but Magnum stopped him, touching his arm lightly.

“Not worth it,” she muttered.

“If I were alone, he’d do me in.”

“Boss said that we need to be more careful. There are so few of us that an uprising would likely result in our extinction.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.”

Finally, they came to where the car was parked. They walked towards it and James stopped suddenly, looking down. There was a small tabby cat with liquid gold eyes staring at him from beside a hunter green dumpster. His tail was moving around sporadically, as though trying to chase away a persistent fly. James stared back, and when the cat did nothing except look back, he yelled,

“What are you looking at?”

It continued to sit there, almost smiling at him, its tail waiving back and forth, and he decided to kick at it. It dodged his boot and sat down once again, watching him fearlessly, almost with a mingled curiosity. Magnum smiled maliciously.

“It likes you.”

“Well I don’t like it. Vile things cats,” he said, spitting at it.

“Watch it. I actually like cats.”

They walked on, finally reaching Magnum’s black Audi, and James lit an elongated pink cigarette – a Freak-brand cigarette. As he blew out the sweet, sultry smoke, she stared at him.

“You smoke that in my car at your own risk, Newskin,” she uttered venomously.

James took in a sizeable amount of smoke and blew it out, right into her face. “You can kiss my ass, Magnum.”

He went for the handle, but found it impossible to open. He tugged harder, but the handle would not budge. He glared up at her.

“Seriously?”

“I don’t want my baby to start smelling like you,” she said before sliding into the driver’s seat. “Now put that damn thing out before I run you over.”

Remembering her reputation for such things, he took a last deep inhalation from the cigarette, annoyed, and flicked it into the cat’s direction. It looked at the smoking paper and then back up at him, still giving him that little, knowing smirk.

He threw himself into the car, not bothering to buckle his seatbelt, as usual. The drive back to the base was uneventful. They ran three lights and made it across the city and into the outskirts in record time. Boss would be displeased if they were late.

In that time, however, James reflected upon his last few years. Working with these people was something he was not used to. Freaks. He was one too, but his power was more subtle. His family had all been Freaks. His parents were some of the first generation. *It’s all evolution*, Boss had said. He got James to do a lot of stuff for him. Steal – countless times. Drugs. Alcohol. Money. Anything Boss could think of; anything he needed.

Kill – there were sixty-three of those, not counting the two tonight. Those were Magnum’s kills. But he had a rule; a code. He would never kill Freaks. He disliked them, sure, but he would never kill one of his own kind. Humans, fine. Whatever. They numbered in the billions. They were disposable. Freaks numbered in the thousands. Not so disposable.

They pulled into the lengthy driveway of the long-abandoned warehouse and parked under a camouflage canopy. They both saluted to the hidden camera in the entrance, and the large steel door opened for them of its own accord. As Magnum and James walked in the door, the Boss looked up from his work at what appeared to be a table covered in bomb makings. Anna stood beside him, wearing her special thin glasses, her hair tied in a bun.

“Ah, good timing,” called Boss, looking back down at the piece of the bomb on which he was working. “Was the mission successful?”

“Yep,” said James, holding the bag up.

Boss took it and pulled a little vial of clear liquid out of the leather rug sack. He smiled and walked away without acknowledging anyone. He wandered back over to his surgical table.

“This is the last piece of the puzzle. You’ve all done well. Now we can proceed with our plan.”

James looked over at Anna inquiringly, searching her for an answer as to what that plan was, but she merely looked away, pretending to busy herself with the metallic parts.

Boss grabbed a syringe from a reflective metal table and inserted it into the vial. Turning the container upside down, he carefully extracted some of the liquid and then withdrew the needle. He kept the thin bit facing upwards and flicked it three times, then squeezed the end so that a small jet of liquid came flying out the top. He turned to the young woman.

“Anna, go open isolation one and wheel the cart out here.”

She looked up, then nodded, still avoiding anyone else’s gaze. James watched her walking slowly towards the hallway, baffled by the request. She was not gone long, and returned pushing a cart with a body-sized pod sitting on top.

“What is that?” asked James.

“You’ll soon see,” replied Boss, an unusual smile on his face.

He pushed a series of buttons on the side of the case, and it opened with a hiss. A young girl with straight brown hair was lying in the pod, clearly unconscious. It looked as though she was not wearing anything underneath the white blanket that covered her from shoulders to toes. Boss smiled as he looked at her.

“This girl is going to help us change the tide of this war. Before, we were subservient. With her help, we’ll take over this miserable world and make it our own. Without human interference.”

“Who is she?” asked Magnum.

Boss smiled. “She’s Mulrone’s daughter.”

James stared at the girl, trying to recall what he had heard. “She’s one of us!” he realized, remembering the rumours. “You can’t treat her like a human!”

“She’s going to help us, James,” said Boss, checking her vital signs. “She’s a telepath. A powerful one. She can communicate over large distances with several people at once. She can also put thoughts into your head. This serum you stole for me is going to help me control her.”

That was why Anna looked so uncomfortable, James realized. She had known how he would react. Well, that would not stop him.

“All this time that I’ve dedicated to protecting my race, only to get to arrive at a place where I need to harm them to advance our cause? My parents and my brother died for you and your fucking war! Now, you’re throwing all that away for revenge on the man who separated us into two distinct races?”

“Not revenge, James,” replied Boss, looking up. “Retribution.”

“No! I didn’t sign up for this shit!” James yelled, raising his gun and pointing it at his boss’ head. Boss observed him curiously. James looked sideways at Anna, who had always been kind to him. She looked

away shamefully as he caught her eye. He sneered angrily, disgusted by her inaction, and even more by what next came out of his partner's mouth.

"It's no use, Newskin," said Magnum sadly. "Put the gun down."

"You're both gonna support a war that can't be won, by sinking this low?" yelled James. "By becoming like the humans and forcing control over others of our kind? Then fuck you! Fuck all of you! I'm gone."

James pocketed his gun and walked out to the door. Finally, he had done it. Done what no other Freak had ever done on Boss' team, despite how many had come and died. They had always followed Boss, without question or thought of rebellion. Now, he would be part of a new group; one that did not deal in secrecy, or work only to betray their own race.

That was when he saw the tabby cat. It was sitting at the open door, its tail waving around aimlessly. It was still giving him that knowing grin. He slowed his pace, trying to determine how it had followed them. Then there was a loud bang, and the cat took off.

James dropped to the floor, the bullet from his own weapon caught inside his heart. His second one, in his lower chest, and his only vulnerability. Boss lowered the gun and walked away as James bled out on the floor.

"Survival of the fittest, James. That's all the game of life ever was."